Introduction to the discussion on repatriation and immediate relief

U.N. Inter-agency co-ordination meeting on Afghanistan (New York, 28 April 1988)

1. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees welcomes this opportunity to exchange views and information on the concerted effort that will be required from the international community and the members of the United Nations system in addressing the formidable task and challenge that lie ahead of us in Afghanistan.

2. There is no doubt that the signing in Geneva, on 14 April 1988, of a Bilateral Agreement between Afghanistan and Pakistan with the USSR and the USA acting as guarantors, has paved the way for increased peace and security in Afghanistan, for the end of a situation that has caused the dislocation of over one third of the population of that country and for the return of those who had to seek refuge outside the boundaries of Afghanistan.

3. It is now our common task to assist this war-torn country in the process of welcoming back its nationals and of engaging in a massive reconstruction and development effort. UNHCR stands ready to co-operate in this task in accordance with its mandate, expertise and competence. Voluntary repatriation programmes indeed offer the best opportunity for the U.N. system to formulate a coherent approach between the humanitarian and developmental arms of the Organization. I do hope that this meeting --as well as the designation by the Secretary-General of an overall co-ordinator of the System's action in favour of Afghanistan-- will go a long way in showing concretely that each of us has a role to play and that the end result can be harmonious.

When will refugees return?

4. The Bilateral Agreement between Afghanistan and Pakistan signed in Geneva on 14 April 1988 under the auspices of the Secretary-General and following the negociations conducted by Mr. Diego Cordovez marks an important step in the creation of conditions that will allow Afghan refugees to return to their homeland in security and dignity. The instrument of this Bilateral Agreement dealing with the voluntary return of refugees contains the basic conditions that have traditionally facilitated the return of refugees. These include:

i) the recognition of the right of refugees to choose freely their place of residence and to move within Afghanistan; and

ii) their right to work, share in the welfare of the State, participate in civic affairs and enjoy rights equal to those of any Afghan citizen.

Above all, the Agreement emphasizes the voluntary character of any repatriation.

5. UNHCR's long experience with refugees, and particularly the Afghans, confirms that the decision to return remains largely unpredictable and will depend --in the end-- on criteria and indicators that the refugees themselves (individually or in small communities) will have defined. One hears of many scenarios. Some foresee a rapid and massive movement while others refer to a process over a number of years. The refugees mention mainly security in their home areas as being the determining factor while political parties and leaders refer to the total withdrawal of foreign troops and a change of Government.

6. UNHCR's own sources indicate that:

a) there are already signs of certain families preparing to move;

b) it is likely that "unregistered" refugees and the poorest among the registered ones will wish to leave rapidly; and that

c) it is likely also that those refugees whose place of origin is located within a reasonable distance from the border will move first. (It should be noted in this context that over one-half of the 3.1 million registered refugees in Pakistan come from provinces immediately adjacent to Pakistan.)

7. It is impossible to predict the number of refugees who would choose voluntary repatriation in any given time-frame. While we have to work on refining our contingency planning on the assumption that voluntary repatriation will be orderly and organized, we also have to be as ready as we can possibly be in the case of a sudden uncontrolled wave of spontaneous returns.

UNHCR and voluntary repatriation

8. The voluntary return of refugees to their homeland has consistently been seen by UNHCR and the international community as the best possible durable solution to any refugee situation. This priority to durable solutions and --among durable solutions-- to voluntary repatriation is entrenched in the Statute of the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees and in the 1951 Convention.

9. Over the last 37 years, UNHCR has helped vast numbers of refugees who had chosen to return to heir homeland. One should recall large-scale repatriation operations to Algeria, to South Sudan, to Angola and Mozambique and to Zimbabwe, to name just a few. Over the years, UNHCR has gained experience and know-how in dealing with movements of refugees and the rehabilitation of returnees.

10. This competence as well as the unique international mandate of UNHCR in monitoring and ensuring the voluntary character of repatriation and the well-being of returning refugees represent assets in dealing with the situation now facing the international community. In calling upon the Office of the High Commissioner to assist in the process of voluntary return of Afghan refugees, the signatories to the Geneva Agreement on Afghanistan no doubt had in mind not only the specific mandate and expertise of UNHCR, but also its knowledge of a refugee population that the Office has accompanied throughout their period of exile.

Preparing for repatriation and initial rehabilitation

11. Throughout 1987, UNHCR offices in Pakistan and Iran have been engaged in contingency planning for an eventual repatriation of Afghan refugees. This effort has included a reflection on a number of possible scenarios affecting the movement of refugees, the formulation of an initial rough plan of action and budget as well as preliminary discussions with the authorities of the two countries hosting the largest numbers of Afghan refugees.

12. Since the beginning of 1988, the pace of this preparedness effort has been accelerated, in close consultation with the Office of the Secretary-General. At the request of the Government of Afghanistan, UNHCR fielded a technical mission to that country in February 1988. At the same time, discussions on the issue of repatriation with the Pakistani authorities and leaders of Afghan parties in exile were intensified. In March, UNHCR created both an inter-services Task Force and a small Operational Unit to spear-head this contingency planning, particularly as regards Afghan refugees now in Pakistan.

13. Over the last two months, intensive discussions have taken place both at Headquarters and Fields levels between UNHCR, the Governments concerned, refugee leaders, other U.N. agencies and non-governmental agencies, with a view to formulating a provisional Plan of Operations and initiating an exchange of information and data at the working level. In addition, UNHCR is

in the process of signing agreements with each of the two signatories to the Geneva Accord, as foreseen in Article VI of the Agreement relating to the voluntary return of refugees. These agreements define the general framework and conditions under which UNHCR will perform the tasks entrusted to the Office by the signatories to the Geneva Accord.

14. In preparing for the repatriation and initial rehabilitation programmes, UNHCR has endeavoured to work closely with agencies that have been traditional partners of the Office in dealing with refugee or returnee situations. Discussions have thus been held with members of the U.N. system such as the World Food Programme, UNICEF and the World Health Organization as well as the International Committee of the Red Cross and scores of non-governmental agencies working in Pakistan for Afghans and Afghan refugees.

15. At this point, I should like to mention the privileged relationship and rapport that has been established between UNHCR and WFP in co-ordinating our respective contingency planning.

16. As is well known, UNHCR and WFP have been co-operating for a number of years in addressing the needs of refugees in all parts of the world. This has been particularly visible in relation to Afghan refugees as in both Pakistan and Iran, WFP has been designated as co-ordinator for all food assistance benefiting refugees. It was only natural that the Task Forces created in UNHCR and WFP should meet and work together in preparing the humanitarian response to the repatriation of Afghan refugees and their rehabilitation.

17. This exemplary co-operation and co-ordination has already resulted in the formulation of the joint Plan of Operations which is submitted for the information of this inter-agency meeting. Furthermore, UNHCR and WFP have jointly fielded missions to both Pakistan and Afghanistan with a view to collecting information and drawing up plans for the logistical aspects of the operation.

18. It goes without saying that from the outset, UNHCR and UNDP have had contacts and exchanged views regarding their respective roles in the initial repatriation and rehabilitation phase and the reconstruction and development phase.

Plan of Operations - Voluntary repatriation and initial rehabilitation of returnees

19. At this point, I should like to give a brief outline of the provisional Plan of Operations developed jointly by UNHCR and WFP.

20. The paper in front of you provides an outline of the three phases of the planned progamme, from the necessary preparation in Pakistan, assistance during the actual transfer of returnees, to, finally, the relied and basic minimal rehabilitation assistance required after voluntary repatriation. The provisional budget is divided into three parts reflecting three different types of requirements and inputs:

- the first one totalling $42.7 million concerns the necessary mobilization of equipment, infrastructure, staff, transport facilities and the stockpiling of shelter material required for up to 1 million beneficiaries over a one-year period;

- the second, totalling $13,6 million, is limited to the cost of transporting returnees and providing them with seeds and very basic tools. This is based on a module of 250,000 beneficiaries and may be multiplied to obtain estimates for larger numbers;

- the third represents a cost of supplying foods commodities to a module of 250,000 beneficiaries over a period of six months. In view of the leadtime required for the mobilization of food commodities, four modules have been costed initially for a total of $32,7 million.

Finally, the last page of the budget gives a projection of total costs should there be one, two or three million returnees.

21. Beyond the "nuts and bolts" and the figures, it was also important to define the constraints and parameters that form the basis of this Plan of Operations. These appear on pages 7 and 8 of the joint UNHCR/WFP document entitled "Special Operation for Repatriation to Afghanistan.

Need for co-ordination

22. As can be seen from the documents that UNHCR and WFP have distributed, the action that we contemplate is limited both in scope and in time. It addresses only what I have called the emergency phase, in other words the actual voluntary repatriation of the refugees, their reception and a modest family rehabilitation package. There will be a need --in parallel to this initial humanitarian effort-- to mobilize vast resources for reconstruction and development. All of this cannot be undertaken within the mandate or competence of any single agency. Co-odination is the name of the game. This is clearly what the international community demands from us.

Points of convergence

23. In concluding, I should like to call the attention of this meeting to some of the necessary points of convergence of the humanitarian or relief phase and of the reconstruction phase. In my mind, these should be privileged areas of co-ordination for all of us and should, perhaps, be considered as priorities.

24. The first point of convergence that comes to mind is the rehabilitation of the road communications infrastructure. Various reports indicate that most roads in Afghanistan are in a bad state of repair and that most bridges have been destroyed. It goes without saying that an adequate roads network will be a pre-condition for both relief and reconstruction work, not to mention economic development. This, together with the following point, should certainly rate high among absolute priorities.

25. The second problem concerns the presence throughout the country of a large number of mines and other military devices that will continue to constitute a threat to security even after the country is pacified. I know of no agency with a mandate for de-mining! But this is certainly a need to be addressed for the security of Afghans and international personnel.

26. The third essential point of convergence is the rehabilitation of the country's food production capacity. The paper submitted by UNDP indicates a sharp deterioration of food production, mainly as a result of the destruction of irrigation systems and the loss of oxen for cultivation. A major and urgent effort will be required in that sector to ensure that refugees who have been dependent on food rations for so many years do not find themselves in the same situation in their homeland.

27. Community services such as health and education will also need to be strenghtened. Successes obtained after years of efforts among the Afghan refugee population in Pakistan should not be lost or put in jeopardy for lack of adequate infrastructure and personnel in Afghanistan.

28. The problem of internally displaced persons within Afghanistan should also be addressed. The UNHCR/WFP Plan of Operations foresees that those displaced persons returning to the same areas as repatriating refugees will be assisted. Many of the internally displaced are now town dwellers and might not wish to go back to their places of origin. Economic integration projects might be required for them.

29. Finally, the problems of Pakistan and eventually Iran should not be forgotten. The Afghan refugees have brought with them a host of problems. The socio-economic impact of the presence of refugees in Pakistan has been studies as part of the preparatory work of the UNHCR/World Bank projects in Pakistan. These problems, particularly the environmental ones, will not disappear with returning refugees. Rehabilitation work might also be required in areas previously occupied by refugees.

30. This is briefly what UNHCR is up to. As you can see, there are still a number of question marks and unresolved problems, but I am confident that we can live up to the challenge. In helping the Afghans, our best allies will certainly be the Afghans themselves. Through years of co-operation with Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran, we have already benefited from the resourcefulness, imagination and strenght of this people.

U.N.H.C.R

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